

DARKEST RUSSIA

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CHAPTER X.—Continued.

"Now, by my father's blood!" he exclaimed, "this is indeed a find. Hold!" he shouted, as he averted a blow aimed at the prostrate and helpless Alexis by Hersy—a blow with an ax, which, had it been delivered with all the strength intended, would have ended its victims' life then and there. "Hold—wait—wait! Who, think you, is this?"

"Who? Speak! Who?" was demanded on all sides.

"Why, Nazimoff, the cruel, cowardly—"

Oraminsky got no further. With a howl of rage the conspirators sprang toward their victim—"Coward, dog, woman beater, your end is near." And Alexis would have been torn to pieces by his infuriated enemies but for Oraminsky's interference.

"Hold!" he shouted, with an oath, "don't act hastily. We must find out what we can."

"But he must die!" yelled Hersy.

"By me!" "By my hand!" "I'll deal the blow!" said others, crowding forward.

"Wait—the avenger has been selected. Ivan drew the red rouble." Alexis heard every word.

"But Ivan is not here; give me the right. I never killed a noble," shouted Hersy. "I will have blood. I love blood. Give me the right to kill him here and now!" And as she spoke she would have carried her desire into execution but for the fact that two or three of her companions restrained her by force, awaiting the words of Oraminsky.

"The right best belongs to Ilda herself!"

Alexis Nazimoff closed his eyes. It was true, then, Ilda was one of this vile gang of murderers.

"Yes, Ilda! Ilda! Where is Ilda?" was the shout.

Even as they spoke, Ilda Barosky, entering and pushing her way through the center of the mass, came front and stood face to face with Oraminsky.

"What is the matter?" she asked hurriedly; "has anything happened to Ivan? Has—"

"We have caught a spy," said Oraminsky, "the accursed—"

"Nazimoff!" said the crowd with one voice, "and there he lies."

"Nazimoff!" exclaimed Ilda. The recollection of the terrible ordeal through which she had passed, the memory of the uplifted whip, the thought of her humiliation and of Nazimoff's cowardice—all these flashed into her mind, and a wild desire for instant vengeance on her foe filled her in a moment. With compressed lips and flashing eyes she turned, her hands clenched, and with the words, "the cowardly Nazimoff!" she sprang toward the helpless figure bound to the bench on which he lay. "You coward!" she exclaimed, as she raised her hand, and with a cry of terror and dismay she staggered back and would have fallen.

She had recognized Alexis.

Her face turned deathly white, the blood left her lips, and it was only by a supreme effort that she kept herself from falling by a convulsive grasp of the table.

"See! See!" said Hersy, "she dares not shed blood. She is weak. I am strong—let me deal the blow. Now, now, now!" and she rushed forward.

Ilda threw herself before the maddened woman. Twice she essayed to speak, but in vain. Her lips moved, but she uttered no sound. She could only gaze into the face of the infuriated woman and motion her to stand back.

"No, I will kill him!" yelled Hersy.

"Wait a moment; wait, for God's sake, wait!" came in gasping accents from the lips of Ilda. She breathed heavily a moment, and then made another effort. "It—it is a mistake—"



SHE HAD RECOGNIZED ALEXIS

mistake—mistake," she said, repeating the words three times, each time with a painful struggle for breath. "This—this—is not—Count Nazimoff." She paused, staggered back to the table for support, and with agony made a prayer in her heart for strength.

"It is Nazimoff; Oraminsky found his papers." The words came in a perfect howl from the vengeful victors, who were thirsting for the blood of their conquered and helpless enemy. "Kill him now!"

The crowd made a simultaneous movement to advance.

Ilda sprang before Nazimoff. The moment's respite in her speech had been of service. She was once more able to command her voice. Stretching both hands toward the conspirators, with a mute pathos which arrested them for a moment, even if it did not alter their purpose, Ilda spoke again: "Wait—a moment—more; wait, and—and—listen." The voice was broken with emotion, but she gained strength as she went on.

She felt that now, if ever, she must succeed in swerving them from their purpose. "Listen, dear brothers—sisters of the people—listen to me—to Ilda—to the sister of Ivan; listen one moment more—for God's sake hear me—hear me to the end. There, tonight, among—among all that throng of nobles there was but—but one to protect me. It was—it was—this—this young officer. Believe me, for God's sake; for dear God's sake, believe me! He was my—my defender—my rescuer. Do not—do not harm him! Have pity on me! I—I—oh, brothers and sisters, he is no spy! I know it; be merciful, for me, to him; spare him, and let him go!"

"No, no, he is a spy! he is Nazimoff! He is here to betray us; he must die!"

The words rang in the ears of Ilda. There was no hope for Alexis; he would be murdered before her eyes.

Hersy had waited for a chance. She had laid aside the hatchet and had grasped a knife—a murderous weapon—and with a fiendish look she sprang forward with it uplifted.

With a cry of mingled anguish and despair, but with the strength of a lioness, Ilda sprang between the murderer and her victim, and, wrenching the knife from her grasp, fairly hurled Hersy back a dozen feet into the arms of her companions.

"Back, murderess! Stand back, all of you!"

The words rang out in startling contrast to the tremulous tones in which her appeal had been uttered a moment before, as Ilda Barosky, standing in front of the prostrate Alexis, her eyes fairly ablaze with the courage of despair, met without quailing the maddened looks of the surprised and astonished conspirators. The weak, pleading, helpless

woman of a moment before had given place to the desperate, courageous and unflinching heroine, who, standing majestically alone, with the knife held in her uplifted hand, looked the incarnation of sublime defiance to the murderous gang who sought the life of Alexis.

To say that they were amazed at the transformation but faintly describes the effect Ilda's words and actions produced. They looked one to the other and then again at the young girl who stood before them. There was not one of them who did not know that Alexis Nazimoff could only be reached over the dead body of his defender, and that Ilda would fight to the death.

There was a hurried whispering, and Kirshkin moved to the front.

Suddenly he made a spring for Ilda.

But not too quickly for her not to detect his object. The knife descended, and Kirshkin, the blood streaming from his breast, was borne back.

"Oh, wretches, cowards that you are! I was weak but a moment since, now I am strong. More of you will die. Stand back!" This as another movement was made. "Stand back! for I swear by the soul of the mother who bore me, the first one of you to touch him dies by my hand. More—I swear to denounce you, to deliver you to the gallows, cutthroats and assassins as you are!"

As Ilda spoke she moved backward, and with a rapid movement passed her hand behind her. It was but the work of an instant for Alexis Nazimoff to run the cords which bound his hands against the keen edge of the weapon. In another moment he had unloosed the cord which bound his feet, and, springing erect, grasped the sword which had fallen when he was overborne.

"Brave Ilda! you have saved me. Stand by my side—we are more than a match for the cowardly dogs."

"Alexis, we will live or die together!"

"They are but two; are you cowards?" cried Oraminsky. "If they escape we are betrayed; perhaps even now—"

He spoke no more.

The sound of a hurried advance toward the door on the outside—a quick, metallic sound of a key as it touched the lock—arrested the attention of all. To the fevered minds of the conspirators the sound suggested the police—the metallic ring fetters, the hurried footsteps a surprise. That panicky feeling which spreads instantly took possession of them. Their bloodthirsty expressions changed to one of fear, and as Oraminsky turned they interpreted his movement as the signal for flight.

"We are trapped!" Someone in chief terror uttered the words.

It was enough.

With one movement the conspirators, actuated by a common and uncontrollable impulse of self-preservation, ranged themselves alongside the wall with the celerity and regularity due to their practice for such emergencies; the concealed mechanism which worked the doors leading to the secret hiding places was touched; the doors opened slowly and revolved as if by magic, and the conspirators had disappeared!

CHAPTER XI.

In the Name of the Czar.

With a sigh of infinite relief from the terrible strain, Ilda, as the last of the conspirators disappeared, felt her overtaxed strength relax; her eyes became dim, she swayed to and fro for a moment and would have fainted in the arms of Alexis had not the rush of cold air from the door above, which now opened, revived her.

Looking up she exclaimed, "Ivan!"

Ivan entered, and with him a woman heavily veiled. But there could be no doubt in the mind of Alexis as he caught sight of the figure. "By heaven!" he exclaimed, "it is Olga Karsicheff."

Then turning to Ilda, Alexis pressed her to his heart. He spoke no word, but there was all of the passionate devotion and affection in his nature

expressed and understood.

Ivan came forward; his companion was Olga.

"I have kept my word," he said, "Olga is here. Why, what has happened? What does this mean?" he added hurriedly, as taking Ilda from the arms of Alexis he gazed with alarm at her pallid face.

"Your sister has saved my life—she can tell you all," said Alexis, as he grasped both the hands which Olga held to him.

Olga, trembling and agitated, suffered Alexis to lead her to a seat



WE SHALL LIVE OR DIE TOGETHER!

some distance from where Ivan was listening with horrified amazement to the recital by Ilda of the attack by Oraminsky and his companions.

Alexis, after the trembling girl had become somewhat composed, listened to her story. It differed in no material particulars to that which he had already heard from Ivan, and as Olga concluded, and with tear-stained face besought his forgiveness, Alexis was deeply touched by her appeal. "I thought of all—of my father's anger, my mother's hatred—for she will hate me when she discovers all!" said Olga, as she approached the conclusion, "but, oh! Alexis! I could not help it, for I love him so, I love him so!"

Alexis was silent for a moment.

Then taking the hand of Olga within his own he said: "Olga, there is a power within the human heart which is stronger than duty, stronger than interest, stronger sometimes even than honor, stronger oftentimes than life itself. It is the power of love. It has changed the destinies of us both. It has brought us together in this strange place to-night. It was to be. Your love has been given to Ivan Barosky as mine has been to his sister Ilda. But what of the future? I am a man, and can bear the consequences of what my father and the world will call my folly, with a man's fortitude and patience. But you are a woman—what does this step mean to you? Have you thought of the future? Dear Olga, trust me freely—as a brother. Command me in any way to make your life brighter, happier, and believe me, there is nothing I will not do to aid you," and Alexis with some emotion laid his hand protectingly on her shoulder.

(To be continued.)

The Cipher Too Much.

While Secretary Hay was in the country one summer, an important piece of official business was pending, and he arranged with Washington that any news that might arrive about the matter should be telegraphed to him in cipher.

Day after day he waited, but no telegram came. One morning, happening to go to the lonely little telegraph office, he said to the operator: "I suppose you have received no dispatch for me?"

"Why, yes, sir," the operator replied, "there was a dispatch for you the other day, but it was all twisted and confused. I couldn't make head or tail of it, so I didn't think it was any use to send it up to you."